

How to Look More Like Jesus

Rich Nathan
September 8 & 9, 2018
When Life is Unfair
James 1:1-4, 12-14

Anyone looking at the American church today would come away with the really unfortunate conclusion that there are millions of Christians in the United States who are not very Christian. Do you agree with that? That there are millions of Christians who do not look anything like Jesus, who we claim to follow?

According to most studies, the only difference between Christians and non-Christians in America is over religious matters. In other words, Christians believe some things that non-Christians don't. Christians go to church more often than non-Christians. Christians read their Bibles more and pray more; they give to the church more than non-Christians do. But in terms of the way that people live their lives outside of the religious realm, many studies say that there's no discernible difference between Christians and non-Christians.

Let me share with you some statistics from a recent Gallup poll.

Slide (Rich wants these to transition in one at a time)

- Church members divorce their spouses as often as their secular neighbors.
- Church members are as likely to be involved in domestic violence as their secular neighbors.
- Church members' giving patterns indicate that they are almost as materialistic as their secular neighbors.
- White evangelicals are the most likely people to object to having a neighbor of a different race
- Of "higher commitment" evangelicals, a rapidly growing number of young people think that co-habitation is perfectly acceptable prior to marriage

And we don't need to go to the poll takers for these conclusions. Those of us who consider ourselves followers of Jesus often just need to look in the mirror. Compare the picture of the Christian life that we find in the Bible and in our own lives. When you look in the mirror, would you say, "I am a content person. I am basically a peaceful person. I am a generally kind person." When you look in the mirror, would you say, "I tell the truth even when it hurts me, even when it's embarrassing, and even when it's inconvenient." Would you say, "I maintain great sexual boundaries. I make it my aim to be sexually pure."

How many of us would say, “You know what, I go to church and sing the songs. I really mean it. But Monday to Saturday when I’m cut off in traffic, I call down curses that would make a sailor blush. I love messages on the love and faithfulness of God, but when push comes to shove, I feel like I’m entirely on my own and I’m really anxious. I complain a lot about my circumstances in life. I’m a Christian, but on social media I am unbelievably snarky and mean-spirited, especially when it comes to politics.

I read my Bible, but I also say one thing to people’s faces and another thing behind their backs. When I’m angry, I give people the silent treatment. As we look out at church in America, I think that many Christians believe that looking like Jesus, becoming spiritually mature, is automatic. So long as we hang around the church for five year or 10 years or 20 years or 30 years, we’ll by definition become mature Christians. All we need to do is log additional time. So long as I punch the clock each week at church or read my Bible, I must be moving forward.

Nothing could be further from the truth that Christian growth is automatic. The fact is that we can all point to people who made decisions to follow Jesus 20 or 25 years ago and are nothing more than big spiritual babies, still functioning like babies, still relating like babies. It’s appropriate when a two-year old acts like a two-year old and talks like a two-year old and makes messes like a two-year old, but when a 20-year old acts like a two-year old or a 50-year old acts like a two-year old, we have a real problem on our hands.

John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement internationally and the man who in many ways became my spiritual father, used to frequently say,

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“I want to grow up before I grow old.” – John Wimber

So, how is it that those of us who have committed ourselves to become followers of Jesus can be made to look more like Jesus? How do we grow up before we grow old? We’ve been doing a series here at Vineyard Columbus titled When Life is Unfair. We’ve been talking about all those situations in life of pain or suffering, disappointment, illness, loss, relational break down, betrayal. All the negative things that everyone experiences living in this world, whether they are followers of Jesus or not. Today, I want to continue in that series as we consider why a good and loving God might permit some of these things in our lives.

One major theme in scripture regarding why our good and loving heavenly Father permits suffering and trials is so that you and I could look more like his Son, Jesus. That’s what I want to talk about today in message that I’ve titled, “How to Look more like Jesus”.

Slide James 1:1-4, 12-14

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; ¹⁴ but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.

In James 1:2 we read:

Slide James 1:2

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

James speaks to us about

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Various kinds of trials

James is giving us a perspective of life that you never hear from the prosperity teachers on television, all the positive thinkers in American culture. He's saying to us that life is a story of various trials. In the original Greek, the word that James chooses is way more vivid than the English phrase "many kinds". The Greek word James chooses is:

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Poikolos = many colored, complex or intricate

James is saying that there is a many colored rainbow of trials that you and I face in life.

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Rainbow

The goal of trials of any and every kind, trials of any and every color, found in verse 4:

Slide James 1:4

⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

The goal of this rainbow coalition of trials that you and I face, to put it simply, is to make you and I look more like Jesus. Let's talk for a moment about the various kinds of trials that a follower of Jesus may face. First of all, we may experience

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Trials because we have forsaken Jesus

Many times, Christians encounter great difficulty and have great pain because we have broken ranks with the Lord. We have stopped following our general and leader. We have separated ourselves from him and we're off doing our own thing. Have you ever experienced the discipline of the Lord because you were off doing your own thing? You knew Jesus. You knew what he wanted, but at that particular moment or in that particular season, you decided to say no to his good and perfect will.

One of the ways that the Lord disciplines his children, very often in the Bible and in life, is that he lets us have what we want. There are times where we are pursuing something that we know that God has said is off limits to you. It's not going to be good for you. Don't go there. Don't do that. Don't enter this relationship. You say, "We know that this will make us happy" so we insist on pushing through the barriers of God's commands. One of the ways that God disciplines us is that he says, "OK. If you insist on having what I told you would hurt you, you can have it."

In Romans 1, we read three times in that chapter the phrase,

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God gave them over

God gave them over. It means God hands us over. God releases us to our own desires. It's as if God says to us, "I've repeatedly warned you not to do this, not to enter this relationship, but if you won't listen to me I'll allow you to have this relationship and it will hurt you. It will break your heart." This particular habit will enslave you. The job that you think you want so much, will ultimately make you miserable. Sometimes, we face trials because we have forsaken Jesus.

At the other end of the spectrum, sometimes we face

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Trials because we have followed Jesus

Virtually all of the original apostles and gospel writers, other than John, died martyr's deaths according to church history. Peter was crucified upside down on an X shaped cross on Vatican hill where the Vatican is built. The Apostle Paul was beheaded. I visited the spot where church history tells us he had his head cut off outside of Rome. The gospel writer, Mark, supposedly died in Egypt after being dragged by horses through the streets until he was dead. James was clubbed to death. Thomas was, according to church tradition, run through with a spear as he was taking the gospel to India.

Sometimes we face trials because we have followed Jesus. One out of every 12 Christians in the world today lives in an area or a culture in which Christianity is illegal, forbidden or punished according to the latest report on global persecution by an organization called Open Doors. For the past 26 years, the organization has published the Open Doors World Watch List. They list the top 50 countries in which it is hardest to be a Christian. Let me read to you from their report. The country in the world where it is hardest to be a Christian right now, and which has topped the list for 17 straight years, is North Korea. It is estimated that there are 300,000 Christian brothers and sisters who live in North Korea.

The second hardest place in the world to be a Christian is Afghanistan. There are thousands of Christians in Afghanistan, but they suffer from Islamic oppression.

Rounding out the top five are Somalia, Sudan and Pakistan. In the United States, we followers of Jesus are relatively free to practice our faith. But it is still possible to experience trials because we follow Jesus.

A husband may get down on his wife because she's a Christian, because she reads her Bible, because she wants to go to church, because she wants to tithe to the church. When friends won't be friends with you anymore because you made a Christian commitment. Or when folks put you in some sort of box that you don't fit in. When a Christian cannot advance in a university setting, they expect you to be a fundamentalist or homophobic or ultra-right wing or whatever because you are a Christian – these are all trials **because** we are followers of Jesus.

But I don't think that James is restricting the multi-colored trials only to things that directly result from our following of Jesus. James has a broader perspective here. I don't think he's talking only about persecution for the cause of Christ. I believe that James is also referring to

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Trials even as we follow Jesus

Not because we follow Jesus, but ***even as*** we follow Jesus. Even though we follow Jesus. In other words, here I am, I'm a follower of Jesus. I'm going to live in obedience to Jesus. I regularly pray. I read my Bible. I try to forgive people who have hurt me. I try to live at peace with everyone. I make it my aim to try to tell the truth, even when it hurts, when it's inconvenient. Even though I live a Christ-centered life, I encounter trials.

By the way, the little phrase that's translated in verse 2

Slide James 1:2

² Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

It's the same verb that's used for a ship that's sailing along smoothly in the water and then runs up on a reef. James is talking about those times when your life is going along really well – it's a really good season. You're doing your job. You're enjoying your relationships, your family, your friends. Your body is working. Suddenly, your boat slams up on a rock or reef. You're taking on water. The rock or the reef was utterly unexpected. You're suddenly stabbed in the back by a trusted friend or boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse. You are suddenly faced with unexpected financial problems – you're laid off or there was a contract that you thought you were going to get or unexpected medical bills. Suddenly, you're attacked at work.

You've hit a rock experiencing financial trials or physical trials or relational trials or ministry trials or vocational trials. How do you respond? Just as we face various kinds of trials, so we might have various responses to trials.

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Various responses to trials

There are, first of all, what I'd call

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The negative responses to trials

In verse 12, James writes:

Slide James 1:12

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial. Because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

You know, friends, when we are undergoing one of those many colored trials, you may feel physically awful. You may be incredibly discouraged because of a relationship,

someone who has misunderstood you. You may hate your job. You are struggling in school.

James is suggesting to us that we often pray the wrong prayers in times of trial. I know what you pray, because you pray probably what I pray. “God, deliver me. Get me out of this. Change the circumstance. Heal me. Fix me. Fix this other person. Get rid of him or her. Give me more money.” In other words, have this trial end.

It is not wrong to pray for deliverance or blessing or an end to the trial. But there are two other prayers that James is encouraging us to pray. I want you to write these down.

You have to pray two prayers when you are being tried. You have to go beyond, “Lord, take this trial from me. Deliver me.” Because sometimes he will and sometimes he won’t.

So what are the two prayers that we are to pray beyond “Lord, deliver me?” The first is

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Lord, keep me from quitting

And the second is

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Lord, keep me from sinning

These are the two great dangers: quitting and sinning. Lord, give me strength to resist both.

Let me take these in turn.

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Lord, keep me from quitting

Slide James 1:12

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

James mentions a quality here that will gain us the crown of life. The same quality that he mentioned in verses 3 and 4.

Slide James 1:3-4

³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Let's understand James' thought process. When you face a trial your marriage, in your health, in a relationship, in your business, or a loved one faces a severe trial, one of the questions that will be posed to you is "Is it worth it?" Is it worth it to keep following Jesus when he is obviously not answering my prayers? Is it worth it to keep obeying Christ and honoring my commitments when I am not getting anything in return? Is it worth it to keep trusting Christ when my financial condition is not turning around and I keep treading water? Is it worth it to keep refusing to compromise in an area, when others seem to be happier when they compromise? "Look at that woman. She slept with her boyfriend and they ended up getting married." I keep refusing to give in and men keep leaving me. "Look at that guy. He got divorced and now he is happily remarried."

Why not just give up? Lots of people do. Why not settle for mediocrity? I got my ticket stamped when I accepted Christ. But to follow God, to radically pursue him, to live a cut above, especially when I am in pain—is it worth it?

Friends, Satan will come along and tell you that the fact that you are fighting means that there is a problem. The fact that you are struggling and wrestling with your emotions means that you have a problem.

Fighting is never a problem. Your wrestling and trials, your difficulties, is never a problem. The problem is always that you might give up fighting. That you might stop striving. That you might quit wrestling. That you might throw in the towel and say to God, "Forget it. It is not worth it." That's one of the two greatest dangers we always face: quitting. Quitting the church because someone offended us. Quitting a ministry because someone didn't compliment us or said something rude to us. Quitting school because it is just too hard.

James says, "Do you know the way to eternal life?" The crown of life is, I think, another metaphor for eternal life, the enjoyment of full life with God. He says, "*Do you know the way to eternal life? Perseverance.*"

Slide James 1:12

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

Over and over the Bible says that the only way we know that we really are converted, that we are the genuine article and not some counterfeit hypocritical Christian is because we persevere. Because we stand the test. James says,

Slide James 1:12

¹² Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

And that phrase “stood the test” means when we have been declared genuine. When we have been approved and stamped by the Lord. God says, “You are 100% mine. You are a child of God.” Then you will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

There are so many false professors of Christianity. The way that you know that you are truly saved according to the Bible (and it says it over 3 dozen times in the New Testament) is that you persevere. You keep following Christ in times of trial. Possessors of eternal life don’t quit. False professors do quit.

James is concerned that people would take another option when they encounter trials other than persevering and that is quitting. There is a second negative option that we might take, and that is sinning.

We ought to be praying not only “Lord, deliver me from this particular trial”, but “Lord, keep me from sinning.”

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Lord, keep me from sinning

We all understand this, don’t we? When we’re pressured, there is a temptation to become bitter about the way we’re treated or take revenge against someone who has hurt us. When somebody talks poorly about us, we have a temptation to gossip and speak poorly about them. We let things drop in conversation – little critiques and judgments about a person – because they’ve hurt us. When we experience trials, we are tempted to sin – to seek a more fulfilling relationship outside of our marriage. We might want to escape and use our particular drug of choice – for some of us it may be eating, for others shopping, for others substance abuse, for others pornography.

Here’s what James says:

Slide James 1:13

¹³ When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone;

Never say that it’s God fault that I sinned. Never say that God set me up. I had no choice. I’m not responsible. My parents are responsible for the way I am.

Circumstances forced me to walk away from God or to jump out of his hand. Everyone would end up the way I am – bitter and angry – if they experienced the trial that I went through. Never say that you had no choice or that God is responsible for your sin.

James tells us that God cannot be tempted by evil. He's totally pure. There's nothing in his nature that would succumb to evil. Therefore, God never tries to trip us up. He never tries to rip us off. He never tempts anyone. He is not given to sin and he doesn't lead anyone into sin.

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Lord, keep me from quitting

Lord, keep me from sinning

Those are the two negative responses to trial. What is the positive response to trial?

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The positive response to trial

Slide James 1:2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

I've mentioned this to you before, but the Bible links together two words that we virtually never connect – joy and trials, joy and suffering, joy and pain. Hunger and pain, absolutely! Frustration and pain, yes. Self-pity and pain, we understand all that. But joy and pain. This is when you understand that the Holy Spirit is at work. This is not natural. You say that it's unnatural to rejoice in suffering. The Bible says absolutely! There's the grace. Joy's a gift. Joy is produced by the Holy Spirit.

Here's what we read:

Slide 1 Thessalonians 1:6

⁶You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible regularly tells us that part of the incredible gift that God gives to his children is the ability to experience joy even in the midst of trial.

We read this in 1 Peter 1

Slide 1 Peter 1:6

⁶In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

The Christian doesn't rejoice because they're in pain. Christians can rejoice in spite of the pain. You don't say, "Yippee, I've got a headache." Or "Isn't it great? I have a flat tire." "Isn't it wonderful that a friend betrayed me?" I'm not a masochist. I don't like pain. Christians rejoice in spite of the pain. Why? Because we **know** something.

Here's what James writes:

Slide James 1:3-4

³ because **you know** that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

You see, when we experience loss or pain in this broken and fallen world, we know that God is at work alongside of this suffering. There's a spiritual dynamic that's at work in this difficulty. We Christians have been let in on a secret regarding trial that no one else has. God's invited us into the factory and he's allowing us to observe this incredible manufacturing process in which trials flow in at the top of the machine and from the bottom, by this miraculous act of God, gets stamped out is spiritual maturity. We look more like Jesus.

We rejoice because by the miracle of God when we encounter a trial and choose not to quit on God or on God's people, when we encounter a trial and choose not to sin against God by escaping, when we Christians encounter a trial and continue to persevere and continue to trust in God, he transforms us. He makes us look like Jesus. We rejoice because we've discovered a machine that turns lead into gold. We rejoice because we're feeding in newspapers in the top end and on the bottom end of the machine, hundred dollar bills are coming out. If you had a machine like that, you'd be down in your basement just feeding newspaper in day and night.

Let me share with you finally

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Various results of trials

A psychologist from NYU named Jonathan Haidt says that people who face horrifically stressful situations often experience as a result of that stress Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. There's a tremendous amount of research that says that when we are overwhelmed by stress, whether it's military or job loss or the loss of a loved one or abuse, it can result in what psychologists call PTSD. It can lead to depression or anxiety or physical illness or heart disease.

Jonathan Haidt says that all of that is true. But psychologists also see something else happen. Something that is little reported on. It's what Dr. Haidt calls

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Post-Traumatic Growth

He says that after a traumatic event, especially in people of faith, he often observed three things occurred. The first is

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Increased resilience

Once people know that they could go through something really, really hard and still survive, they live life with much less anxiety. They say, I never thought that I could ever go through this kind of cancer or this sort of loss or this kind of disappointment and not be destroyed. But I'm still here.

And the second benefit is

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Strengthened relationships

Very often, people who have undergone tremendous trials experience much deeper relationships with friends or families. Suffering ties us to other people in a much deeper way. The third benefit that Dr. Haidt has observed in Post-Traumatic Growth is

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Increased reality

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Increased resilience
Strengthened relationships
Increased reality

Suffering and difficulty pushes people back to what really matters. We sometimes live lives where we're upset by a thousand different things. Upset by something someone said that was insensitive. We're upset about the promotion. We're upset that the offer for a house we wanted didn't go through. When we've really been through the fire, it reduces so many of these common upsets to nothing. In the end, we realize what ultimately matters is our relationship with God and our relationship with other people.

I don't want anyone listening to me right now to ever imagine that I'm minimizing people's pain or that God minimizes people's pain. He never does. We've seen in this series that God grieves with our grief. People in the Bible regularly cry out, "Why?" But God answers our suffering in Jesus. God is so committed to destroying evil in this world

that he's ready to use it for good, right now, to make us look more like his Son, Jesus.
We can grow up before we grow old! Let's pray.

How to Look More Like Jesus

Rich Nathan
September 8 & 9, 2018
When Life is Unfair
James 1:1-4, 12-14

- I. Various kinds of trials
 - a. Trials because we have forsaken Jesus
 - b. Trials because we have followed Jesus
 - c. Trials even as we have followed Jesus
- II. Various responses to trials
 - a. The negative responses to trials
 - i. Lord, keep me from quitting
 - ii. Lord, keep me from sinning
 - b. The positive response to trials
- III. Various results of trials
 - a. Increased resilience
 - b. Strengthened relationships
 - c. Increased reality